Pierce County

Department of Emergency Management   **Steven C. Bailey**
2501 South 35th Street   Director
Tacoma, Washington 98409-7405
(253) 798-6595

House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness, Science and Technology hearing entitled, "Emergency Planning and
Preparedness: Federal, State and Local Coordination."

Steven C. Bailey, Director
Pierce County Department of Emergency Management

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"Emergency Planning and Preparedness: Federal, State and Local Coordination:
Testimony for Steven C. Bailey, Director of Pierce County Emergency Management

September 11, the Indonesian tsunami and Hurricanes Katrina/Rita have, to some, caused a paradigm shift in the world of emergency management – from single level collaboration to new innovative partnerships and cooperation on a multi-faceted level. For many of us, this approach was always the current practice but it is now mandated nation wide. The key to effective mitigation, preparation, response and recovery is coordination and collaboration at the regional level.

Pierce County has made great strides in this arena by creating the Terrorism Early Warning and Response task force, as well as participating in the Seattle/King County Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI). Citizens, municipalities, county agencies, local jurisdictions and regional, state and military partners work together on a daily basis to address all hazards facing our communities. In Pierce County, this most recently became evident during a shooting at the Tacoma Mall. Hundreds of public safety personnel from multiple agencies and jurisdictions responded to that incident because of the strong relationships that have been developed. Had we not all trained, planned and exercised together, the outcome may have been very different.

Interoperable communications is the current hot topic in emergency response. The Tacoma Mall incident is yet another example of why interoperability is so important. Many of the responding agencies utilized different frequencies, but because of recent improvements, all agencies were able to talk with on another. More specifically, Pierce County Emergency Management purchased a state-of-the-art Mobile Operational Command Center (MOCC) with homeland security funds that is utilized on a weekly basis. On that unit is a piece of equipment called the ACU 1000 which commonizes radio frequencies at the flip of a switch. Our public safety dispatch centers are equipped with the same technology so this version of interoperability is available countywide, not just when our MOCC is deployed.

Many operate under the misconception that the answer to interoperability is 800 megahertz radios, but there simply aren't enough channels available for public safety and it is cost prohibitive. We estimate it will cost $50+ million for Pierce County to move to the 800 megahertz system and that does not include the cost for infrastructure (towers, etc.). As mentioned above, Pierce County has made great, cost effective improvements, but it still isn't seamless.

Probably the biggest lesson, even above interoperability, is citizen and community preparedness. After years and years of telling the public they need to have a plan and enough supplies to be self sufficient for at least three days, Hurricane Katrina showed us that people just aren't following through on the message. We discovered an enormous gap between what people expect and what government is able to provide. It appears that citizens expect government to appear on their doorstep within 30 minutes of a disaster with a hot plate of food, a bottle of water, blanket and a check for $500. When emergency response disciplines can't meet 9-1-1 call demands on a daily basis, what makes people the response should be any different in a disaster? We do not have the resources.

So what is the answer? The key is individual and community preparedness, for all hazards. During the hurricanes, individuals and neighbors were not prepared and didn't follow the direction of local officials. They fell into what we call normalization, a thought process that makes one think the situation just can't be that bad, or it can't happen to them. Here in Pierce County, we have found something that works.

Pierce County Emergency Management has a national award-winning program called Pierce County Neighborhood Emergency Teams (PC-NET) that is incrementally closing the aforementioned gap in our area. PC-NET is a neighborhood-oriented approach to emergency preparedness and homeland security. It is based on the belief that a cooperative effort between a county and its citizens is the only sure way to protect a neighborhood and to prepare for a major disaster.

If individuals and their neighborhoods are prepared to mutually assist each other, lives can be saved, property can be spared, and emergency services can be freed to respond to the most devastated areas. This is accomplished by organizing block groups into a variety of disaster response teams, each of which has a simple one-page list that clearly outlines necessary tasks. In addition, we have partnered with the Pierce County Sheriff's Department to provide a crime prevention program that, to date, has resulted in a 27 percent average drop in property crimes for PC-NET neighborhoods (up to 50% in some areas).

PC-NET goes beyond conventional community preparedness and crime prevention efforts of simply raising awareness – PC-NET means taking action. People and neighborhoods that are prepared will know what to expect during times of disaster, what to do, and how to come together in an organized, timely response.

The problem is that funding for this program and others like it is virtually non-existent. Pierce County Emergency Management enjoyed a three-year federal grant that got the program started, but the funding was exhausted at the end of 2005. Federal CERT funding only provides $25-65 thousand, depending on the fiscal year, for a two year grant. This does not cover the salary for even one staff member to run a program for our 750,000 residents. Recent attempts to work the funding through congressional representatives have also been unsuccessful. Educating our citizens on how to prepare and training them to respond and be self sufficient for at least one week will have a great impact on all phases of emergency management. As mentioned in the beginning of this testimony, collaboration is critical, not just with those in professional emergency response roles but also with the citizens we serve.

Contact Information:

Steven C. Bailey, Director
Pierce County Department of Emergency Management
2501 South 35th Street
Tacoma, Washington 98409
253-798-6595

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